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THE GRADUATE

Barely out of school, Jess Manafort has managed to produce and direct a film starring one of the most exciting young casts since *Dazed and Confused*. Nathaniel Rich finds out how. Photographed by Nina Mouritzen

Jess Manafort has a playful, whimsical manner, speaks charmingly about her close relationships with her family and friends, and laughs frequently and contagiously. She seems, in other words, like a fun person to hang out with at a college party—indeed she just graduated from NYU a couple of years ago. It's when she starts talking about making films—her aspiration for as far back as she can remember—that it becomes clear how she managed to write, direct, and produce an attention-grabbing feature film, starring a large ensemble cast of young buzzed-about actors, before her 25th birthday.

"For 20 years I shot home videos," she says. "It'd be torture for my younger sister. For one film, when she was seven, I taped her up in a straight jacket. She wasn't acting the right way and I started yelling at her: 'You need to act crazier. CRAZIER!'"

Manafort is laughing, but there's no mistaking the clarity of her vision and her ability to command a set. The results are evident in *Remember the Daze*, which follows the frolics and debauches of a group of mid-Atlantic suburban kids on the last day of high school. *Remember the Daze* may share something in common with other school's-out-for-summer films—*Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, *Can't Hardly Wait*, and Manafort's personal favorite, *Dazed and Confused*, come to mind. But Manafort's debut is distinguished by her nuanced views of adolescent sexuality and her distinctive visual style, defined by a capricious camera that flits between scenes and conversations, picking out revealing details and awkward encounters before moving on. As a result, the film's character studies are deeply intimate, to the extent that some viewers may occasionally have the unsettling sensation that they're seeing too much.

Manafort is not only a focused director; she's also a shrewd producer. On the basis of her script for *Remember the Daze*, she received a \$100,000 grant

from the prestigious Richard Vague Film Production Fund, awarded annually to two recent NYU graduates. The turning point in the application process came during a 10-minute discussion she had with Vague himself. "He said to me, 'This isn't the type of movie I myself prefer—too much drugs—but your pitch really made me believe you would get the film made.' He implied that he was investing in me, even more than the project." But what did she say to convince him? "I told him that I'd guarantee I'd get it done in two years. And I was right. So he was right. I'm really good at getting things done fast. It's something that I'm lucky to have. I gotta jump while I'm sharp. I'm in a hurry, and I just want to get so much done, right now."

On the strength of the grant and numerous awards she won for her senior film, she herself raised a "significant" amount of money from family and friends—enough to finance the film. A team of Hollywood producers were impressed by her efforts, and helped her further, enabling her to recruit an impressive cast of up-and-coming Hollywood actors, including Chris Marquette, Melonie Diaz, Amber Heard, Leighton Meester, and John Robinson.

The large cast didn't prove too large a challenge for Manafort, even though she acknowledges that she had less professional film experience than anyone else on set. "I asked a lot of questions, but I learn really fast. And I look everyone right in the eye so there isn't room for attitude. One thing I learned right away on set was how to control people's energy. When I was hyperfocused, everybody else would speed up. If I had a really good time, then everyone else had a good time."

With one movie completed, another being written (about a group of twenty-somethings living in Los Angeles), and various directing offers awaiting her response, it's clear that Manafort is having a good time. And she's getting things done—in a hurry.

